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ANNE CUSACK Los Angeles Times

KATRISE STEWART, 17, left, gets a high five from Erin Green, center, as Desiree Glover, right, looks on during a self-esteem building workshop sponsored by the county's Runaway Outreach Unit.

Social workers networking

L.A. County employees are staying connected to juveniles on the street through Facebook, family ties and foot patrols.

SANDY BANKS

Three years ago, Claudia Jacqueline Benjamin was one of hundreds of Los Angeles County foster children who preferred the chaos of the streets to the security of a stranger's home.

She'd gone into foster care at 15, after a fight at school revealed problems at the home where she lived with her grandmother.

But when she stayed away from her foster home one night, she was moved to another in a neighborhood far away from her family in South Los Angeles. She went on the lam for three weeks and landed in juvenile hall.

"After that, I just kept running away," said Claudia, now 18. She would live on the streets for weeks at a time, sleeping in cars, at bus stops, on sidewalks and crashing on friends' couches.

Authorities moved her through almost a dozen placements — group homes, foster families, detention facilities.

She felt restless, rootless and angry, she said. The least little thing would set her off. "I was like, 'They don't care. So I'll just leave.' It was easy to feel neglected."

But now she's not worrying about where she'll sleep, but about what she's going to study in college. A week ago she moved into a stable, comfortable foster home — a place she'd run away from once before. She appreciates it this time.

What made the difference, Claudia told me, flashing deep dimples and a little girl's smile, was a social worker willing to reach out — and keep reaching until Claudia reached back.

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Claudia's story is a reflection of one of the most vexing problems of the county's system of foster care:

The Department of Children's and Family Services doesn't have enough family foster homes for parent-less adolescents. Unhappy teens who run away become wards of the Probation Department because they're considered delinquents. The two agencies barely talk to one another, so those children languish on the streets and are often victimized by thieves, drug dealers and pimps.

Four years ago, in the wake of a scandal over hundreds of unaccounted-for children the foster care agency agreed to try an unconventional approach, forming a small Runaway Outreach Unit that relies not on hauling kids in from the streets, but building trust to bring them back.

"The old way wasn't working," said the unit's leader, social worker Eric Ball. Since 2008, his team — using Facebook, family connections and foot patrols — has located 1,500 missing youths and eased 500 into independent living and out of foster care, he said.

"The important thing is to make contact and begin to earn their trust," Ball told me Saturday, from a crowded downtown community

center, where his team had gathered hundreds of their teenage wards for a daylong conference on healthy living.

"We're trying to empower them," Ball said. "Nobody likes being told what to do."

Ball knows; he was a hard-headed teenager too. He grew up in South Los Angeles with a single mom and spent time in juvenile hall for stealing cars. A football scholarship sent him off to the University of Arizona.

He earned his master's degree at Pepperdine University, then worked in group homes and drug treatment programs.

Now he works the streets with six social workers, reaching out to homeless children tired of being shuffled through a system where everyone is paid to take care of them — and no one seems to listen to them.

Many of the teenage runaways have mental or emotional problems, or are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Some want to reunite with their families, others are so wounded they don't trust anyone.

The outreach team enlists help from family members, churches and community groups to draw boys away from gang-banging, rescue girls from sex-trafficking rings, and talk pregnant teens and new mothers into care and off the streets.

"You stay in touch, so they know you're really there for them," said social worker Val Cacatian, who deals with 12- and 13-year-olds who've run away from foster homes because they miss their siblings or their mothers.

"They still have the idea that things could be all ~~right~~, if only they could get back home," she said. "By 16 or 17, they realize, 'My mother loves her drugs more than she loves me.'

"Sometimes they'll contact me on Facebook: 'Hey Val, can you find me a placement?' They get tired of couch-surfing, living in the streets."

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That's what Claudia did a few months ago — reached out to Cacatian and said she was tired of running the streets.

"Val told me, 'I'm not gonna force you to do *nothing*. If you work with me, I'll help you be where you want to be.' "

Where Claudia wanted to be was close to her family. "Val got a relationship with my grandma, my brother, my family ... and got to know them all," she said.

When that didn't work out, "Val stayed for hours in her office, trying to find a place for me to live."

And when Claudia was locked up last spring in juvenile detention camp, she was delighted when Cacatian showed up for a visit.

"Val wanted to see if I was safe, if I was doing all right," she said. "I wasn't even her case no more. But she came to check on me ... said 'I'll pick you up whenever you want.' "

There's a sense of wonder in Claudia's voice as she shares the memory.

It's more than the offer of caseworker to client. It's the kind of promise a mother might make, if she wasn't out of reach.

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WED

8-22-12 LA Times

LETTERS

Los Angeles Times

THE SPORTS PROGRAM at Camp Kilpatrick may not return after the aging facility is rebuilt.

A need for sports

Re "To the sidelines for good?," Column, Aug. 18

As a volunteer in L.A. County's juvenile detention system, I agree with probation officer Kurt Keller: Canceling the sports program at Camp Kilpatrick is a "heartbreaker." Kids desperately need to be taught how to perform in real-life situations.

If there is no issue with money, as the county says, then what could possibly be the reason for abandoning a program that is a proven success? Did the U.S. Department of Justice, which is monitoring the county's juvenile corrections system, specifically rule out sports?

The Department of Justice believes that, based on studies, the best way to spend $41 million to reduce recidivism is to rebuild Kilpatrick without its sports program. However, I don't think living in brand new cottages will matter if the teens don't learn the real-life lessons that competing fairly in sports offers. Kilpatrick's wards may end up back in those cottages very soon.

ALICE BUCKLEY
Los Angeles

It is a shame that with all the money wasted on lofty "studies," no one has apparently bothered to study the obvious.

I observed Kilpatrick teams firsthand for several years, and the only inconsistent thing about them was their numbers. Playing was a privilege, and misbehavior meant that a kid would miss games. Sometimes the bench was full, and sometimes there were barely enough players to field a team. But the kids who played knew they were in a spotlight, and their behavior was excellent.

I can only imagine what they learned from these experiences, but since it has never been "studied" it probably has no validity with the feds. Common sense is uncommon inside the Beltway.

MIKE GALLAGHER
La Habra Heights

Unlock the data

Tues 8-21-12 LA Times

Baca should disclose whether undocumented immigrants are held longer than required.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY Sheriff Lee Baca has waged a long, misguided effort to withhold information about his department's cooperation with immigration officials and the demographics of his jails. His justification for refusing to release the material in response to a request under the California Public Records Act comes down to this: A federal contract preempts any state law requiring disclosure.

He's wrong. The sheriff should hand over the data.

Baca entered into an agreement with the Department of Homeland Security to check on the immigration status of jail inmates. But that's a contract, not a free pass that allows him to ignore state laws. Baca knows this because a state judge said as much last year when he rebuffed the department's request to toss out a lawsuit brought by immigration advocates, noting that Baca failed to identify any reason or exemption that shields him from his obligations under the law.

The National Immigration Law Center and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which filed the lawsuit to obtain the information, are trying to determine how many illegal immigrants were held in the county jails between 2004 and 2011, for what reason and for what length of time. Releasing that information would pose no threat to public safety and intrude on no legitimate privacy interests.

Moreover, preliminary data released by the sheriff as part of the lawsuit suggest that undocumented immigrants were held for an average of 17 days longer than legal residents facing the same criminal charge, according to the day laborers organization. That's troubling given existing jail overcrowding, and that problem is likely to grow worse under AB 109, the state law that transfers responsibility for most newly convicted nonviolent offenders from the state to the county. An estimated 7,000 new inmates are expected to arrive in the coming year as part of prison realignment.

Whether the sheriff should be holding illegal immigrants at all isn't the issue, at least in this lawsuit. Rather, the questions are whether those undocumented immigrants who are held spend far longer in custody than required and at what cost to taxpayers. It's time for Baca to release the records that will help answer those questions.

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4-18-12 Sat

To the sidelines for good?

The sports program at Kilpatrick juvenile camp shouldn't be scrapped

SANDY BANKS

The Mustangs will take to the field for the final time this fall. The sports program at the Kilpatrick juvenile detention center is being disbanded — "suspended," officials call it — so the 50-year-old facility in the Malibu Hills can be leveled and rebuilt.

The remake has been in the works for years; it's one of the oldest, most decrepit of the county's 14 rural juvenile camps, with a gym yellow-tagged since the Northridge earthquake and a pitted, patchy playing field.

But it is also the only camp with a sports program, one that made a national name for itself six years ago in the movie "Gridiron Gang."

Kilpatrick's teams play in a regular high school league against kids from suburban private and religious schools.

Los Angeles Times

CAMP KILPATRICK teammates at practice. The sports program at the juvenile detention center may not return after the aging facility is leveled and rebuilt.

The new Kilpatrick facility will be less like prison and more therapeutic, its institutional dorms and classrooms replaced with intimate cottages and counseling centers.

The "state-of-the-art rehabilitative compound," as county officials call it, will cost $41 million and reopen in three years.

Its wards will be spread among the county's 13 other camps. Probation officials say they hope to restore the sports program when the new Kilpatrick opens.

But they said something similar a few years ago when they closed two other camps that offered firefighting programs. Those are still shut down.

Odds are Kilpatrick's teams are done. Sports aren't central to the vision of the probation department's federal overseers.

"This is a heartbreaker to us," probation officer Kurt Keller told me this week. I wrote a column about the sports program two years ago when he was its basketball coach.

His team made the state playoffs, then lost its chance at a championship because of a paperwork glitch. But it won its league's Sportsmanship Award because of how well the players conducted themselves game after game in the gym.

"A lot of us came here for the chance to coach," Keller said. "It's a way to get close, to get to know the kids, to have an impact that lasts when their time is done.

"Once this program is gone? It won't come back. They never do."

It's not a question of money, said Cal Remington, deputy chief of the Los Angeles County probation program. "That really wasn't part of the decision." The sports program doesn't cost much; just equipment expenses and small stipends for coaches.

But because of its history of failing kids, the county's juvenile corrections system is being monitored by the U.S. Department of Justice. That means old-school character building through sports is out, and "evidence-based integrated treatment programs" are in.

A system that has relied for decades on manhandling and medicating its charges is now required to offer only programs — mental health counseling, group therapy sessions, targeted education — that formal studies say reduce recidivism.

The sports program is simply collateral damage in a long-overdue campaign to make the troubled probation camps more responsive to delinquent teenagers' needs.

"If we can get them to think in a more positive logical manner, in the long run they'll make better decisions and won't get themselves in trouble again," Remington said.

But can't a sports program teach those lessons, too? A bad attitude can get a player benched; a bad choice can get him dropped from the team.

Sports has plenty to offer wayward kids. Even proba-

tion honchos agree. "We certainly see the value in discipline, in learning to be a team member," Remington said. "But no one has studied the sports program" to quantify its impact on delinquent kids.

So maybe it's time they did — before they turn their camps into sports-free zones on the misguided notion that athletics don't count and only "therapeutic" things make a difference.

It's common sense that teenage boys need an outlet for their energy; a place to shine, a mandate to cooperate, a chance to see their teammates as comrades, not gang rivals.

The lessons camp therapists aim to teach — identifying strengths and weaknesses, setting and reaching goals, learning to say no to a short-term indulgence for the better long-term reward — are lessons teams learn through hours of practice, in the gym or on the field.

The probation department has made a mess of its calling over the years; mired in scandals and allegations of abuse, accused of doing nothing but warehousing kids.

This turn toward treatment is admirable, but the one-size-fits-all approach isn't.

It's the same sort of single-minded focus that's hamstrung L.A. Unified schools, where the preoccupation with high-stakes testing has indeed improved academic performance. But in the process, it's squeezed out other choices — art, music, vocational programs — that have been a lifeline for struggling kids.

The boys assigned to county camps are testing-the-water criminals. Some boys need therapy, some need mentors, some need punishment and some might just need time to grow up. All of them deserve a chance to practice what they're learning.

"When our kids compete, they see real world experiences," said probation supervisor Glenn Williams. Consider a recent soccer game in which "the refs were clearly biased," he said. Every call went against his team.

"Our kids sucked it up, took it like men," he said. "It was a life lesson: People are going to judge you. Just do your best, put one foot in front of the other and keep on going forward."

That's something you can apply to an algebra class or talk about in a therapy session. But its power grows when it's practiced in public.

The sports programs at probation camps ought to be expanded, not scrapped. And not just because they create heroes — former NFL star Keyshawn Johnson is one. Or because they've steered a handful of athletes into college.

"It's tough to measure the good things," said Keller, the basketball coach. "They talk about recidivism and all that. But just to be out there, working with one another, representing themselves and our program in a positive way.... That counts for a lot to us."

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